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Plan for Rouge would mean less concrete, more wildlife

Channel change conceivable if it won't hurt flood control

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BY JOEL THURTELL
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

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The 180-foot-wide concrete bed that lines nearly half of the Lower Rouge River could be partially removed if the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers decides it would not bring back the flooded residential basements that were political dynamite in Detroit and close-in suburbs decades ago.



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The sun reflects off the water in the channelized portion of the Lower Rouge River at the Southfield Freeway in Dearborn. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers put in the concrete in 1972 to control flooding; now it's talking about removing concrete down to the normal water line. (August 2005 photo by PATRICIA BECK/Detroit Free Pr)

Government environmental planners are studying whether they could remove the concrete channel to the normal water line between Michigan Avenue in Dearborn and I-94.

The remaining portion of the concrete channel down to the Ford Rouge plant would not be altered.

The goal is to improve habitat for wildlife, Adam Fox, chief environmental planner for the Detroit district of the Corps of Engineers, said last week.

Thirty-four years ago, the river was straightened and given a concrete channel because of complaints that sewage was flooding basements.

When early 20th-Century captains of industry like Henry Ford built steel mills and auto factories beside the Lower Rouge, it was only natural that stores, offices and thousands of homes would be built nearby in Detroit and its suburbs.

A sewage system was created to relieve all of those homes and businesses of their waste by draining it through pipes that dumped into the river during

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wet weather. Major work to end that practice by separating sewage from storm water is complete or under way.

Basements flooded years ago when it rained hard because the river couldn't carry away the water fast enough. The river's last 10 miles are nearly flat, and the stream's natural course meandered, further slowing the current.

In 1972, the Corps of Engineers straightened the Rouge, lining it with a V-shaped concrete bottom 180 feet wide from edge to edge and with a 33-degree slope. The concrete sluice stretches from Michigan Avenue to the Ford Rouge plant, roughly four miles.

The fix worked -- it gave flooding waters a nearly straight shot to the Detroit River with no curving banks or tree roots to slow the flow.

With flooding controlled, it became possible for developers to build the Hyatt Regency Hotel and the Fairlane shopping mall on what had been a floodplain.

But fish don't spawn on concrete. The marshes that once lined the river and provided habitat for fish are gone, said Jeff Braunscheidel, a Michigan Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologist.

That may change. In 2001, the Rouge River Gateway Partnership, a coalition of private businesses, governments and colleges, proposed a so-called renaturalizing of the channelized section of the Rouge.

Fox said he's conducting a feasibility study to determine the cost and practicality of reducing the concrete channel's footprint. He plans to do a computer analysis to find out how effective the bottom part of the channel would be if the upper portions were removed.

If the river could flow into newly made wetlands, fish might spawn, native plants might grow and the river might resemble its former self, said Ed Bagale, vice chancellor of the University of Michigan at Dearborn and cochairman of the Rouge River Gateway Partnership.

Said Fox: "If we can take the concrete out of the channel above that level, we would have to be able to reestablish the stream habitat and make it look more like its upstream kin."

Five years ago, the cost was estimated at \$14 million to \$16 million. That has to be recalculated now, Fox said. The project would compete for funding with a similar plan for the channelized section of the Los Angeles River in California, Fox said.

But the Corps has to be careful. "We cannot make changes that would lead in any way to a degradation or reduction in the function" of the channel, Fox said.

In other words, no flooded basements.

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